

The Neglected (III): Jacob Burckhardt - Defender of Culture and Prophet of Doom

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The Neglected (III)

Jacob Burckhardt - Defender of Culture and Prophet of Doom

IN THE STRICTEST MEANING OF THE TERM, JACOB Burckhardt, the eminent historian and widely acclaimed expert on European art, cannot be considered a neglected author. Yet nor does he belong to the mainstream of European political thinking; he is to be found on the sidelines as a remarkable, but somewhat erratic, figure, representing a unique sort of extreme cultural criticism directed against modernity.

Even in his own time Jacob Burckhardt was very much an outsider, to a considerable degree as a result of his own choosing. Born in Basel in 1818 into a highly respected local family, he remained for most of his life in this beautiful, although comparatively remote, Swiss city, rather than seeking or accepting academic honours abroad, with the possible exception of the five years 1854–58 when he taught history of art at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule in Zürich. Repeated offers of chairs at the Universities of Tübingen and Heidelberg were declined and when in 1872 he was offered Ranke's famous chair at the University of Berlin, the foremost chair of history in Germany, he again refused. Likewise, he displayed little ambition as a writer; only a fraction of his oeuvre was published during his lifetime. Admittedly, though, his *Die Zeit Constantin des Großen* and *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* were spectacular successes with a far-reaching impact on further research in these fields and even on the writing of historiography in general. Even so, the most important writings, or at any rate those which were of the greatest interest to the general public, were only published after his death. His most momentous book, the *Welthistorische Betrachtungen*, or more correctly, his lectures *Über das Studium der Geschichte*, were even published contrary to his own intentions. Indeed, it is

only since 1982, thanks to Peter Ganz, that we possess a satisfactory edition of this most spectacular of Burckhardt's works. This was in fact a series of rather loosely organized lectures with many additions and notes accompanying them.¹ It was only to his students and a fairly small circle of close friends and academic acquaintances that he confided his deepest thoughts and as time went by he became even more reluctant to address himself to the general public: by and large it was only his students who were privy to his thoughts.

Jacob Burckhardt's rather remote way of life, devoted almost exclusively to scholarly work and to the study of art, including numerous trips to see art treasures, museums, galleries and the like in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, was chosen deliberately. Early in his life Burckhardt had for a few years acted as political editor of the Basel newspaper; soon afterwards he decided to leave politics alone: 'For me politics is dead, whatever I do, I do as a human being'.² He did not wish to become entangled in any way whatsoever in day-to-day politics. Instead, he deliberately opted for a contemplative existence which might at first sight be considered antiquarian in the sense in which Nietzsche used the term. In fact, however, this was not so. His exclusive concern with the European cultural heritage was not a mere refuge, it was in the last resort politically motivated. Burckhardt acted upon the principle that historical reflection helps the individual to free himself from the popular prejudices to which everyone is subjected in his own age, enabling him to judge events from a viewpoint elevated far above everyday affairs. He himself put it as follows: 'Our contemplative approach is not only legitimate and a duty, but also a dignified need: for it is tantamount to freedom

¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *Über das Studium der Geschichte. Der Text der 'Weltgeschichtlichen Betrachtungen' auf Grund der Vorarbeiten von Ernst Ziegler nach den Handschriften herausgegeben von Peter Ganz*, München, 1982. See also Wolfgang Hardtwig, *Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Alteuropa und moderner Welt. Jacob Burckhardt in seiner Zeit*, Göttingen, 1974 and Hayden White, *Meta-history. The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe*, Baltimore, 1980, pp. 230–64. Also Jörn Rüsen, 'Jacob Burckhardt', in *Deutsche Historiker III*, ed. by H.-U. Wehler, Göttingen, 1972.

² Cf. Karl Löwith, *Jacob Burckhardt. Der Mensch inmitten der Geschichte*, Stuttgart, second ed., 1966, p. 127. Translations by the author.

amidst general servitude and the stream of necessity'.³ Historical observation provided a fixed vantage point in the middle of an ever accelerating process of historical change which, as he saw it, had during his lifetime entered the initial stages of what he called the terminal crisis of occidental civilization, associated with the inevitable decline of the old European culture.

LE TERRIBLE ESPRIT DE NOUVEAUTÉ

In political terms Jacob Burckhardt was, at any rate at first sight, a radical conservative. In his earlier years he sympathized for a while with the ideas of liberalism. But he soon developed his own brand of conservative thinking which, while it had little in common with conservative party politics, did partially coincide with the conservative positions of his own day. He deliberately stood in the camp of traditional European culture and he was convinced that it could not survive under the conditions of an egalitarian, modern society. Most, if not all, great cultural achievements of the past had been brought about by tiny ruling elites in conjunction with small privileged groups of artists, scholars and writers. The modern age of egalitarianism sounded, so Burckhardt believed, the death knell for the old European culture.

Burckhardt's position was in many ways similar to that of Alexis de Tocqueville. Both observed the decline of the traditional European order with dismay and concern regarding the likely future of freedom and civilization in the approaching age of mass democracy and material civilization. Both were oriented to the social conditions of the pre-revolutionary era, i.e. eighteenth-century Europe with its relatively stable social order and its modest degree of state interference in the life of the average citizen, at least as far as he belonged to the higher orders. Whilst Tocqueville praised the essential role of the intermediate orders in society in providing a maximum of freedom for the individual, Jacob Burckhardt favoured smaller political units and a decentralized European system of powers which allowed a great variety of principalities,

³ Jacob Burckhardt, *Gesammelte Werke*, Darmstadt, 1956 ff., vol. 4, p. 7.

small or large, to live alongside one another, providing fertile ground for art, literature and scholarship.

If anything, Jacob Burckhardt was even more strongly influenced than Tocqueville by the impact of the revolutionary processes of his own day, which he traced back to the French Revolution. Tocqueville did not consider the egalitarian trends of modern times, which he saw at work most prominently in the United States, entirely in negative terms, inasmuch as the new democratic principles could be considered creative as well as destructive, though perhaps fraught with danger from the viewpoint of individual freedom. Jacob Burckhardt was much more of a pessimist. His assessment of what he considered to be the revolutionary trends in European societies was far more radical. He was of the opinion that his contemporaries were living in an Age of Revolution which was qualitatively different from all hitherto known history, inasmuch as there was not only historical change such as goes on all the time, often imperceptibly, but change built into all public institutions, political or otherwise, and that at a steadily accelerating speed.⁴ In November 1871 Jacob Burckhardt wrote:

... almost everything which we witness in our own day represents intrinsically an Age of Revolution; we are probably only in the beginning, or perhaps the second act of this great drama; the three apparently quiet decades from 1815 to 1848 have in fact turned out to be a mere interlude in it. This revolutionary age appears to become one great movement which stands out in stark contrast to all known history of the globe.⁵

In Burckhardt's opinion the decisive factor in all this was '*le terrible esprit de nouveauté*' which for a while Napoleon had promised to tame, but which by then had pervaded the whole of society and had influenced deeply the social conduct of all classes of the population.⁶ 'The French Revolution had brought about one principle of decisive quality, namely justifying and willing change allegedly for the common good.'⁷

More radical than most conservative thinkers Jacob Burckhardt saw in this desire for change, which in his opinion

⁴ Jacob Burckhardt, *Historische Fragmente. Aus dem Nachlaß gesammelt von Emil Dürr*, Stuttgart, 1957, pp. 260 ff.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 276. Translated by the author.

was the most distinctive feature of his own age, essentially a 'blind force' nurtured by a shallow belief in progress and propelled by the hope of material gain rather than by any spiritual or cultural values of any description. On the face of it, people believed in the possibility of improvement and progress through intentional social action; in fact, he saw a 'blind desire for change' at work, fuelled by mere materialistic motives and gaining more and more widespread recognition in the course of undermining traditional authority. It is largely because of this fact that, in Burckhardt's view, the Age of Revolution had turned into an accelerating process of change which was about to undermine all social differentiations.

Burckhardt's extremely critical assessment of his own time, and indeed of modern times up to our own, was arrived at against the backcloth of a highly original interpretation of the history of Western culture or, to put it more precisely, a particular conception of universal history. Jacob Burckhardt repeatedly stated that he had nothing in common with the philosophers of history of his own time and his frequent polemics against Hegel are a case in point. He objected to all attempts at reconstructing the course of world history according to a guiding principle. 'Such bold anticipation of a scheme of world history is bound to fail, because it starts from an erroneous principle.'⁸ Hayden White pointed out recently that this radical stance was based not only on empirical grounds, notably the argument that usually the general scheme according to which universal history was reconstructed in a systematic manner by the philosophers was merely a projection of their own personal views, or at any rate the views of their own time, upon the past. Burckhardt in fact objected to those varieties of the philosophy of history which attempted to reconstruct history upon teleological principles of any kind, in particular Hegel's concept of 'progress in the consciousness of freedom', because he recognized that such philosophical schemes always contained an element of encouraging change by conscious human action, in order eventually to bring about an ideal or, at any rate, a better world and that they thus fuelled the general desire for change even more.⁹ Indeed,

⁸ *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, p. 26.

⁹ White, *op. cit.*, p. 236 f.

Burckhardt's objections to this kind of interpretation of history extended to his fellow historians as well, namely the German National Liberal school of historians who deliberately reconstructed history in the light of the present, thereby invigorating certain political trends of their own time by providing them with an historical aura. All genetic historiography of this genre was repugnant to him, precisely because it would appear to be servile to the predominant fashions of the day, either knowingly or, more often, unknowingly.

Burckhardt's own frequent statements that he wanted nothing to do with a systematic approach to the interpretation of history and that he preferred to give only impressionistic cross-sectional interpretations of particular historical formations have to be taken with a pinch of salt. Even though Burckhardt's method indulged in the colourful description of individual phenomena, he in fact wanted to find out about the constant factors in the historical process rather than about the individual events. He went for the typical, recurrent patterns of history. As a historian he concentrated his endeavours upon what he called 'those things which repeat themselves, the constant, the recurrent which correspond with our own notions and are therefore understandable to us'.¹⁰ He deliberately defined his objective as a historian as 'cultural historiography'¹¹ in marked contrast to the then current notions of the writing of history. Cultural historiography was, in his view, not just a special discipline of history, but an alternative programme of how to reconstruct past reality: 'cultural history is the study of a sequence of configurations [*Zuständen*], while ordinary history considers the sequence of events in their interconnections.' Likewise, Burckhardt did not perceive history primarily in terms of the deeds and actions of men; he deliberately shifted the emphasis towards an anthropological approach which accentuated the role of man as a passive and indeed, as a rule, helpless object of historical forces beyond his control, rather than as being master of events, although this does have a role in his writings as well (cf. his Renaissance

¹⁰ *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, p. 3.

¹¹ Cf. Jörn Rüsen, 'Die Uhr, die die Stunde schlägt. Geschichte als Prozess der Kultur bei Jacob Burckhardt', in *Historische Prozesse*, ed. by K.-G. Faber and C. Meier, München, 1978, pp. 189 ff.

works): 'Our point of departure is the only lasting and, from our vantage point, acceptable centre, namely man as an enduring, striving and acting human being as he is and was and always will be.'¹² The sequence should be noted, enduring (and indeed suffering) is listed first and deliberate action last! In accordance with this he wanted the word 'happiness' to be deleted from history, while the opposite notion 'misfortune' ought to be retained. Burckhardt was guided in all these issues by fundamental misgivings as to the notion of the ability of man consciously to determine his own future, on however small a scale, or to reconstruct society in such ways as to effect genuine progress and a greater degree of freedom for the individual. Indeed, he believed that most political philosophies of his own time, notably liberalism and socialism, were based upon the false conception of the goodness of man which the prevailing social conditions prevent from being experienced in reality. Burckhardt blamed Jean-Jacques Rousseau above all for having launched this fundamentally false notion as to the original nature of man. His own view was essentially a pessimistic one, though, as Theodor Schieder pointed out, it proves on closer inspection to be of a dualistic character. Man has a dual nature: on the one hand he is but a 'bird of prey', on the other he is a spiritual creature and as such is capable of achieving great deeds.¹³ It is this polar tension in man as a human being which is at the centre of Burckhardt's historical thinking.

CULTURE AND THE STATE

Indeed, Burckhardt's historiography sought to assess historical epochs as being conditioned by the predominance of particular types of human beings. This is most notably the case in his *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*, but also in his *Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* which in his interpretation was very much the creation of a new, extremely individualistic type of man who excelled in the uninhibited living of his life to the full and who made full use of all human potentialities

¹² *Über das Studium der Geschichte*, ed. P. Ganz, p. 226.

¹³ 'Die historischen Krisen im Geschichtsdenken Jacob Burckhardts', in *Begegnungen mit der Geschichte*, Göttingen, 1962, pp. 142 f.

while not hesitating to use force in order to have his own way, if need be, as did the 'men of violence' during the Renaissance period. However, Burckhardt did not only have in mind the so-called 'great individuals', the *Bewegungsmenschen* (who succeeded in imposing their own personality upon history), but all those who were carriers of a substantive culture. These people are, however, in Burckhardt's view, always small minorities. Indeed, whether culture, in its intrinsic meaning, can flourish or not depends on whether the principle of individuality is upheld against pressures from above (notably by the state or the religious authorities) or against pressures from below, notably the rabble which, motivated by mere greed, would not allow any culture which is elitist or aristocratic by nature to emerge or to survive.

High culture is, all in all, a rare species in world history. It flourishes under particular political, social and religious conditions and indeed can attain peaks of development at certain fortunate junctures of history, but it is an inherently endangered phenomenon prone to suppression on the spur of the moment by political, economic, religious or other forces of the most diverse kind. It would appear that really great cultural achievements can only come about in the intervals of the great drama of world history, particularly when traditional political or religious power structures are on the wane, whilst the resulting power vacuum has not been filled by the masses who always demand a proper share in the good life which is a corollary to and, to a certain degree, the necessary prerequisite for great art, literature or scholarship. There is no justification whatsoever for a notion of history which assumes that there is after all progress in history, or even a slow discontinuous process towards a higher level of liberty, humanity and culture. On the contrary, the whole of history tells of suffering, of the rise and fall of ever new power elites and the repeated thoughtless and irreparable destruction of cultural achievements of the first order. There is no meaning in the historical process as such; rather it is a sequence of events often caused by utterly blind forces and at best by the action of 'men of motion' (*Bewegungsleute*) who neither know about the history of mankind and its cultural heritage, nor possess a sound vision of the future which they hope to bring about. History must be considered as a great laboratory

in which constellations occur from time to time which allow men to achieve momentous cultural deeds or to create cultural artefacts, if and because they can afford to elevate themselves above the sphere of mere material deeds.

These great cultural achievements constitute a kind of ideal history of mankind which, however, is only present in the minds of a small educated elite which is the main bearer of tradition from one generation to the next. This ideal history of culture stands in stark contrast to general history. It serves as a signpost and provides orientation for all those who want to be human beings in the genuine sense of the word, although they find themselves in the midst of a stream of obligations by which their everyday lives are determined to an ever greater degree.

It is at this point that Burckhardt assigns a certain social, or perhaps political, function to the cultural elite, that is to say the so-called *Gebildete*. In the introduction to *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* Burckhardt puts this as follows: 'It is the special duty of the educated [*des Gebildeten*] to acquire as complete a knowledge of the development of culture as possible; this distinguishes him as a conscious human being from the unconscious barbarian.'¹⁴ The *Gebildete* are called upon to act as a counterweight to all those forces in history which operate in favour of the consolidation of the power of the rulers and the further extension of state control which may eventually stifle all individual creative activity and impose rigid doctrinaire views upon the people. Likewise, however, they should resist the rabble who do not care and indeed do not know about culture and aim at levelling all social differentiations regardless of the social costs, material or ideal.

In his most famous work, wrongly, but not entirely unjustifiably known by the title *World Historical Reflections*, Jacob Burckhardt set out to describe the precarious balance between domination and freedom, between the unrestrained rule of individualism and complete state control of all individual conduct. This is the core of his famous, ideal-typical theory of the three great historical forces (*Potenzen*) of state, religion and culture which forms the backbone of his interpretation of world history and which can rightly be called a philosophy

¹⁴ *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5, p. 15.

of history, albeit of a genre different from those of Hegel, Marx, Comte and Spencer. None of these three forms can do entirely without the others. Culture in particular cannot thrive without a degree of protection by the state and a certain satisfaction of the primary religious requirements of the masses of the population by religious institutions of some sort. Hence the three *Potenzen* are reciprocally dependent upon one another, whilst nonetheless in irreconcilable conflict with one another.

Burckhardt's notion of the state or, as we would prefer to call it in modern terms, of domination is extremely realistic, if not pessimistic. He would have nothing at all to do with the conception of the state as an institution whose function it is to act as the guardian of certain fundamental moral principles in society or which even embodies 'morality' as such, as was argued at the time by a whole school of German philosophers from Hegel onwards. Nor did Burckhardt have patience with the various attempts to justify, or indeed, explain the origins of the state by reference to natural rights or a contractual agreement on the part of the ruled in one way or another. In a rather naturalistic vein he maintained against them: 'As far as we can see violence is always first.' The state is constituted by power and not by whatever moral or legal principles to which recourse may be taken in order to justify domination in one way or another. In the last resort 'power is always evil, whoever is exercising it. It is a greed and *ipso facto* insatiable, hence as such unhappy and therefore bound to make others unhappy as well.'¹⁵ The state has a natural propensity to extend its control over an ever wider range of human affairs and at the same time a passion for centralization which may prove irresistible if it is not checked by either of the other two primary forces in world history. Burckhardt conceded that in modern times a certain moderation in the brutal nature of state power had been achieved, as often happened in the later stages of cultural development, but he stuck rigidly to the opinion that the state has no function in the sphere of morality. It was not the duty of the state to impose moral principles upon society; this was entirely up to the latter.

¹⁵ *Über das Studium der Geschichte*, ed. Ganz, p. 257.

Burckhardt also strongly objected to those notions which attributed to the state, and in particular to the modern nation state, a cultural mission of whatever kind. He was quite outspoken about this: 'On the contrary, in the first place the nation wants power above all... one wishes to belong to something great and thereby reveals that power is the first and culture at best a secondary objective.'¹⁶ There was but one relative justification for state power and even for great power status, namely 'the necessity of achieving great objectives in foreign affairs, the preservation and protection of cultures which would otherwise perish and the promotion of certain sections of the people, themselves given to passivity.'¹⁷ But from the point of view of culture, not the great but the small state, like those to be found in the system of city states and *signorie* in Renaissance Italy or in eighteenth-century Germany, were infinitely preferable. A decentralized exercise of power was an ideal figuration for the growth of sublime culture.

The function of religion in history was assessed by Burckhardt with even more detachment and coolness of attitude. The great world religions undoubtedly catered for the religious needs of the people, known in all ages and by all peoples, but in doing so they tended to petrify the original religious messages by gradually creating powerful religious institutions which largely monopolized the teaching of religious doctrine and the ways of achieving salvation, thereby becoming serious rivals to the state. The institutionalization of religious doctrine, which kept the latter alive long after the original religious fervour had evaporated, was tantamount to stifling all cultural growth again, if not held in check by the state, or by the forces of society in its own right.

While state and religion are static elements in the great drama of world history, permanently attempting to extend their sway over their peoples by all the means at their disposal and, if necessary, eliminating all individual spheres of activity, culture is a dynamic element. 'Its impact upon both state and religion is one of continuous modification and decomposition — except under conditions when they have subjected culture totally to their will and made it subservient to their own

¹⁶ *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, p. 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

objectives.' This led Burckhardt to emphasize that there will always have to be a strict dividing line between state and society; for, at least in its outward form, society represents culture against the other two *Potenzen*. Indeed, Burckhardt was rather modern in that he did include the sphere of material life and economic production in his notion of culture, a notion which on close examination is by no means meant to be merely a lofty matter exclusively concerned with art, literature and scholarship; rather, it encompasses the whole of man's activities. It is the spontaneity of human action and not substantive principles by which culture is defined, at least in theory. The material culture, as it were, creates a certain 'spiritual overflow' which, being accumulated over the centuries, provides fertile ground for all those forms of human activity by which man becomes conscious of himself as a spiritual being. Once this stage is reached, however, this most sublime form of human activity becomes a historical force in itself: '*Wenn der Geist sich einmal seiner selbst bewußt geworden, bildet er von sich aus seine Welt weiter.*'¹⁸

At this juncture Burckhardt is far closer to Hegel than he himself was aware. Indeed, his naturalistic approach to historical reality in many ways reflects the classical Greek attitude towards history as a force not dissimilar to nature itself, governed by fate and undisclosed laws rather than by human will and human action. The great cultural achievements which acquire a semi-eternal status inasmuch as they eventually become part and parcel of the cultural heritage of a people or a group of peoples, are ultimately creations of the human spirit. Even the destructive forces which inevitably bring down empires and religious institutions which seemed to have been built for eternity originate from this most sublime element of human activity. It is apparent from this that in substance Burckhardt was not such a rigid conservative thinker as would appear from his commentaries concerning contemporary politics in his own time. It should be noted, however, that any such dynamic activity leading to social change in its various manifestations, whilst being the source of sublime artistic or scholarly achievements, is the province of small, educated elites who enjoy a markedly privileged status in society,

¹⁸ *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4, p. 44.

materially and otherwise, while the common people have to furnish the means of subsistence for them. Burckhardt was inclined to think that the smaller and the more elevated from everyday life these elites were, the more they achieved. Hence, culture requires social conditions of a very specific nature. These elite groups can never be upheld against the many without invoking state authority or religious tradition in order to justify a hierarchical order in society which gives them a privileged status.

Culture is, therefore in a way, just as dependent upon the state as an agency providing protection against outside forces or internal convulsions and upon religion as a source of traditionalist legitimation, as they, in turn, are dependent upon society and culture. Everything depends, therefore, upon whether a reasonable balance exists between these elements; only under such conditions can genuine culture really thrive for any long period and create lasting cultural artefacts. The Greek *polis* would appear to have been one such fortunate configuration and the Italian Renaissance another. Possibly, the decentralized system of a plurality of smaller powers in Central Europe, with but a fictitious central authority during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was another, though perhaps not quite as propitious for the cultivation of an individualist culture.

But quite apart from that, a relative balance between the three key forces of history would appear to be essential for culture to flourish and furthermore for the survival of any given social system as such. It is historically possible for one of the three forces (*Potenzen*) to gain the upper hand over the other two, or perhaps for two of them jointly to dominate the third. For example, the state may take over complete control of religion, or subject culture entirely to its own interests. If this happens, it may be irretrievably lost as an independent variable in the unending stream of the historical process. This would be tantamount to condemning the respective social system to slow but certain petrification. More often than not, culture was made totally subservient to state power, thereby losing its inherent quality of being a source of dynamic change, let alone great cultural achievement. (It is difficult nowadays not to think of the social systems within the Soviet bloc which conform almost exactly to the criteria just mentioned.)

According to Burckhardt it is more likely that an imbalance between the three *Potenzen* may trigger off a crisis in the respective social system which may, according to the circumstances, not only lead to its rapid destruction but also pull other, adjacent historical formations into its orbit: they may all be doomed to eventual death due to a series of revolutionary convulsions. Indeed, in such times the process of historical change accelerates. Social formations which had been built up gradually over decades or even centuries may be fundamentally altered or destroyed within months or even weeks. While states or established religions may either collapse during the course of such 'historical crises', or enhance their sway far beyond what had been thought possible before, culture, at least in its more sublime variations, is always bound to fare badly if not become lost altogether.

THE THEORY OF HISTORICAL CHANGE

It is this theory of historical change which provides the point of departure for Burckhardt's judgments on the political and social developments of his own age. Burckhardt was deeply convinced that since the rise of the modern industrial system and the French Revolution, the precarious balance of the three *Potenzen* had been severely disturbed. This balance had been a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of traditional European culture as a most sublime expression of man's spiritual activity. The impact of the French Revolution and of the doctrines of liberalism and democracy had been so deep that the all-important dividing line between state and society (the latter being the material embodiment of culture) was about to be progressively eroded. Under the conditions of universal or at any rate popular suffrage, popular demands upon the state to fulfil the material needs of the people, rather than to stick to its traditional role as guardian of the social order externally and internally, had become too strong to be resisted any longer. This, however, necessitated an extension of state control over society in almost all spheres of life.

In Burckhardt's opinion this development would do neither of them any good. On the one hand it would result in a mushrooming of state power, through which all individual initiative

would gradually be stifled, on the other hand governmental power would become more and more subservient to the wishes of the masses. The eventual outcome would be, he thought, the rise of caesaristic regimes as the obvious form of authority compatible with universal suffrage. The caesaristic great power state of the future would have little patience with the cultural heritage of its predecessors, nor would it any longer provide sufficient shelter for those social groups primarily interested in the arts and the sciences. The rise of modern nationalism was another factor which worked in the same direction. It gave additional stimuli to the rise of the omnipotent state which subjects society entirely to its objectives.

Indeed, from the start, Burckhardt was disillusioned with the nationalist doctrine of his age, with its liberal just as much as with its more conservative variation.

Burckhardt's deep-seated worries were further intensified by his analysis of the emerging industrial system. On the whole he assessed its momentous consequences for the modern world remarkably correctly. It was about to change fundamentally the condition of life for everybody, but he had little to say in its favour. Rather, he was appalled by the impact of the new industrial spirit upon the cultural heritage of Europe. With the greatest concern he observed that railways and industry were making deep inroads daily into what could be considered the European cultural heritage; with considerable fervour, reminiscent of present-day ecological debates, he deplored that the great historical metropolises of Europe were about to be defaced by railways, bridges, factories and opulent but tasteless buildings on an ever grander scale. He certainly welcomed the foundation of new museums everywhere and the great efforts being made by the new bourgeoisie, as well as by the aristocracy, to collect art treasures, a process which was facilitated by the enormous wealth created by industrial capitalism, partly because it was so unevenly spread amongst the population. But he nonetheless complained bitterly about the almost daily loss or defacement of important artefacts of the culture of the past. During his second visit to London in 1879 Burckhardt filled his diary with many notes to this effect; he regretted that the face of London was being

destroyed by more and more new, ugly railway bridges and preposterous buildings.¹⁹

This attitude was more than mere sentimental longing for the past. Burckhardt was fully aware that the ongoing loss of historical monuments or the gradual defacing, from the historical aspect, of the urban environment in his time was bound to have unfortunate repercussions on the survival of traditional cultural ideas as such. This was regrettable not only from an aesthetic point of view, but also on individualistic and, in a way, on liberal grounds; the cultural heritage was in Burckhardt's view the breeding ground from which new creative initiatives might grow which, in turn, might give the impetus for the rise of new forms of social and cultural expression and, perhaps, for the rise of new historical formations. What Burckhardt was concerned about was the apparent finality of what he saw going on; the driving forces behind the new industrialization appeared to be both irresistible and irreversible as they were propelled, in the last resort, by a desire for material gain and progress in the physical welfare of the masses. It was at this very juncture that Burckhardt's high conservatism converged with extreme leftist views about the nature of the capitalist system which allegedly subjected mankind to a new servitude. The people, or at least the overwhelming majority of them, were not, however, aware of this at all. On the other hand, Burckhardt anticipated the danger for culture which might originate from anti-capitalist policies. Rather gloomily he remarked: 'You cannot imagine what a tyranny will be exercised over the spirit under the pretence that erudition is a clandestine ally of capital which has to be annihilated.'²⁰

Burckhardt was fairly sure that the twin forces of nationalism and industrialization were bound to lead to an era of 'national wars and deadly international competition'.²¹ This in turn would encourage the rise of militarism as the most effective

¹⁹ Cf. Werner Kaegi, 'Europäische Horizonte im Denken Jacob Burckhardts', *Drei Studien*, Basel, 1962, pp. 13 ff.

²⁰ Löwith, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

²¹ *Historische Fragmente*, p. 278.

form of mobilizing the political and physical power of nations engaged in political and economic rivalry or even open warfare with each other. Soon the rulers would discover the advantages of a militaristic organization of society from the viewpoint of the power interest of the caesarist state which in any case seemed to be the obvious answer to the needs of the age. In prophetic visions Burckhardt sketched the outlines of what he thought was bound to come sooner or later. In April 1872 he wrote to Heinrich von Preen:

The fate of the workers will perhaps be most conspicuous; I have a foreboding which may sound silly right now, but which nonetheless I cannot get out of my mind: the military state is bound to become an industrialist on a grand scale. The agglomerations of men in the huge industrial workshops must not be left forever to their misery and their greed; a certain measure of misery, carefully controlled, begun and ended with a roll of drums, with *advancement* and in uniform – it is this that is logically bound to come.²²

This and other similar prophetic statements have rightly been considered as a forecast, however vague, of the rise of the totalitarian state and, in particular, Fascism. Indeed, Burckhardt's concern with the amorphous structure of the modern state which has somehow swallowed society, thereby itself becoming prey to nationalism and demands for ever greater welfare provisions, touched a sore point. Since then, Talmon and many others have elaborated upon much the same point, namely that an unstructured society in which the individuals have no independent standing and no intermediary institutions to fall back on in case of necessity, tends to give rise to despotic rule, as the balance of the social forces, which is a necessary prerequisite for free societies, is lost.

It has to be admitted, however, that Burckhardt greatly overemphasized the authoritarian and indeed the caesaristic trends of his own time and much the same can perhaps be said of his rather negative assessment of modern industrialism. He was so much of an anti-modernist that he sometimes tended to exaggerate his observations to a more than tolerable degree. On the other hand, he was always careful to present them in a cautious and indeed merely impressionistic manner. His

²² Cf. Jacob Burckhardt, *Briefe*, ed. M. Burckhardt, Bremen, 1965, p. 312 (26 April, 1872).

forecast of the caesaristic super-state never specified time or region; nor were his forebodings of despotic rule in a still distant future intended to be more than indicators by which certain trends of post-revolutionary Europe would be highlighted, trends which might assert themselves in historical reality only if no counteracting factors intervened. What Burckhardt offered were impressionistic, historical trend analyses which, however tentatively they were formulated, nonetheless threw and still throw light on key issues of modern society. They were arrived at by a careful analysis of past history and opened up possible alleys for interpretations of the present and the future alike.

Burckhardt himself was deeply pessimistic about the future of European civilization as he knew it. 'I do not expect anything of the future', he wrote as early as 1843, 'it is possible that we will still be granted a few fairly bearable decades, similar to Roman antiquity under the emperors.'²³ The little hope that he still had, he placed on a nearly total dissociation from the predominant trends of his own time and on efforts to keep knowledge about the old European culture alive among the public or, at any rate, among the erudite elites which were the standard-bearers of aestheticism, culture and spiritual consciousness. Burckhardt defended this option in a rather defensive yet at the same time remarkably persuasive manner: 'We may all perish, but at least I want to choose for myself the interest for which I am to perish, namely the culture of Old Europe.'²⁴ This was perhaps not quite as defeatist a line to take as Burckhardt would have had his contemporaries believe.²⁵ If anything could help, he thought, it was to pursue the study of art and literature and history in relative isolation from the predominant fashions of his age. A new constellation might emerge in which the spirit of European culture, embodied and indeed hidden in aesthetic artefacts and scholarly writings, might provide once again the fertile ground for a new culture by which the historical process might be given a new, unforeseeable direction.

²³ *Briefe*, ed. M. Burckhardt, vol. III, p. 112.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146 (5 March 1846).

²⁵ A few lines later Burckhardt speaks of 'reconstruction [*Neugestaltung*] once the crisis is over', as his and his partner's destiny.